

scars *not a signal*



I  
LOVE  
THE  
PETTING  
ZOO

Brian  
Looney  
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cc&d  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Arrival .....	3
I Love the Petting Zoo .....	4
Ride .....	5
Gypsy .....	6
Inclusion .....	7
Balloons .....	8
Miniature .....	9
Elma .....	10
Longing .....	11
Gum .....	12
I Love the Petting Zoo .....	13
Roger .....	14
Animals Are Silly .....	15
Blossom .....	16
Born They Live .....	17
Home-Grown .....	18
The Keeper .....	19
Outhouse This Way .....	20
Eat a Dog; Pet a Hog .....	21
I Love the Petting Zoo .....	22
Alexander .....	23
Trapped .....	24
Birds .....	25
Rebel .....	26
Smile .....	27





# ARRIVAL

I look for their arrival in the mornings, the way they pour out their cars like a driven herd, the blinding, eastern sun pushing at their backs. The caretakers drive them on in standard formation, grim and careworn. That is, one or two adults in the lead, maybe one on each side watching for strays, and a couple more bringing up the rear, hurrying along the slower ones, granite-faced. From a distance, one discerns their rustling shouts of “Heyyyyy,” or “Ho therrre,” or “Keep togeth-errrrr,” in sharp or baritone commands.

And when they finally reach the ticket stand, they play about, begin to graze, anxiously awaiting access, while their drivers purchase entry. As if they were on the trail, and behind the gates was the only oasis, the only watering hole on an arid, arduous journey. And then, pouring in with howls and shrieks, elbowing and jostling and trampling. The gates slam shut behind them. The company disperses.





# I Love the Petting Zoo

I love the petting zoo, the petting farm, the children's zoo—even better than the circus. And as to zoonosis, well, nothing worthwhile is without risk.

I love the petting zoo, the carefree exploration. Tame as slaves, the animals, whose function is to please. And we receive their friendliness, their dependence, the subjection due a master or a god. It makes our children happy.

I love the petting zoo, the stroking pens, the children's farm. Signs on every kennel, stable, cell. Pictures and designs. Toddle through the doors and meet the friendly inmates. Palm their friendly snouts. Scratch their friendly ears. Kiss(yes kiss) their friendly mouths.

I love the petting zoo, the pay and feed and ride. The money-making scheme, the carefree exploitation. And the animals don't stamp their hooves, or butt their heads, or gnash their teeth, or rebel against the natural order, or revolt against their keepers, like some humans that I know.





## Ride

Obese, Caucasian child sits on a grimy, underfed camel. He grips, in each hand, a melting popsicle, which dribbles down his dimpled fists, trickles to his elbow and patters into the beast's mangy fur. In fact, one wonders whether the curving valley between its humps was there *before* the bundle of joy had slunk on his back. The poor beast's eyes are rolling in the whites. A dull, pink, sandpaper tongue lolls from its slackened, loose-jaw lips like a thick strand of bubblegum. The neck strains skyward, lame, knobby legs quiver, quiver, quiver upon the rust-colored pit. The well-worn rope about its muzzle is tautly held by the keeper, who leads it 'round and 'round in circles about himself, constantly turning with his arm outstretched to guide the failing camel, while the bundle of joy digs in his heels and whoops like the cowboys *as seen on TV*. His sugar-stuck jowls shiver with delight—a joy to the beholder, a promising boy. But then his turn is up.





## Gypsy Gypsy

“Next child, please. Next. Child.”

And what is this? He appears frail and fearful, trembling and uncertain. One of these hypersensitive boys you hear about. Not quite right upstairs, I understand. A little soft in the head. He shifts from foot to foot. His eyes are stubborn and evasive, molting puddles of fear.

For where is his grin, his ice cream, his joy? He seems unduly disturbed by the attractions, which give the well-adapted child happiness. But he. He looks left to right, startles back a step, can't decide whether to laugh or cry. His cheeks are twisted in an expression which bridges the two. He is a full head shorter than his classmates.

The parents are to blame, of course, for raising such a runt. He should pluck up his chin, straighten his spine. That boy shames the dominant species. For if we cease to be dominant, we lose our spot in the evolutionary ladder. Either we ride them or they ride us. Animals respect strength. That's nature.

Anyways, the dark-eyed child(I think he has some gypsy in him) merely stares at the camel, as if somehow communing with it. An aura of sadness about him, while behind, the impatient queue elongates.

“Next child, please.”





# Inclusion

There they are. That must be them. Parents of the gypsy runt. The resemblance is uncanny. The same dark, absorbent eyes, the same disturbance. Together they sit, on a bench far-off, not at all at ease, shooting glances at the exit. I'm sure they haven't yet defined their nerves, the reasons behind their alarm.

Maybe some detached quack recommended the petting zoo, explained the need for inclusion, "A wonderful opportunity to develop those communication skills," or perhaps, "A great way to broaden and enliven your son's sensory-motor capacities," or, "To escape the confines of home and school, to diversify his perspective."

Now a trip to the petting zoo, doctor's orders. There they remain, rather unnerved, countermanning their deeper feelings in favor of the esteemed psychologist's professional opinion. And perhaps he is correct, after all. That boy lacks in character.





## Balloons

Buy a balloon at the petting zoo. Bunches of them, multi-colored, protruding from the stands, a disorderly line before each one. The children are in motion: leaping, bobbing, whirling. They whip their arms like windmills, or kick their sneakered feet, or launch their little torsos.

And all around, the voices. A whole mess of sound, a cacophony of youthful peals and yelps, of wails and whines and whimperings—coupled with the groans and guffaws of fenced-in mammals. The air is ripe, heavy with dung, with hay and feed. It merges to form a sour scent which summons tears, burning tears, until the eyes adapt.

There is the carousel in endless rotation, a slow display of humanoids, the homunculus in joy. You have only to extend your arm and caress their manes or pat their cheeks, or proffer your bits of candy—and watch them greedily snatch it from your tempting fingers; watch them plunge their fists into their maws, bulging rosy cheeks.





## Miniature

Behold, the miniature donkeys, horses, and sheep. Miniature, so that the children do not fret. Tiny like Lilliputians, like Thumbelina, festively gated beneath the red and white striped canopies. Best part is, they are ignorant of their disability. They are quite charming; perfectly naïve, domesticated creatures. If you want one, honey, just ask your mother. They are, in fact, for sale.

Miniature, and on display. Miniature, and bred that way. Their little legs, their little manes, their little snouts. They are miniature, but fully grown. Pet them all you like, son. These will fit in any backyard.

I love their build, their stature, their lust for life, which vastly exceeds their size. For they act like normal equine: feeding, trotting, whipping their mini-manes. The munchkins of the petting zoo. Hardy figurines, about the size of a large canine, and that is the biggest they are ever gonna get.





## Elma

The lady bottle-feeds the calf. Elma suckles at the nipple. The rubber protrusion flexes at her hungry maws, while milky rivulets dribble down her eager neck and mat her clotted hair, giving it a sluggish appearance, like a swamp. At times, she closes her eyes, but never rests in feeding. The moistened nostrils flare and contract.

The mouth breaks away. The tongue sneaks out and drapes the screw top, tastes the cool container, gripped, as it is, by gloves. Gloves worn, presumably, to assist the grip, to prevent the bottle from being wrenched away and swallowed. Such is Elma's hunger.

The crowd converges and the children point, fascination-exclamation. All would like to be the feeder, if only for a moment, if only to befriend the calf named Elma. And if they fell down dead right there, perhaps the calf would lick the sugar from their bluing lips, curiously paw at their eyes, or urinate indifferently upon their miniature, pubescent bodies.

The lady bottle-feeds the calf, until the milk is gone. Then a friendly pat upon the head, and the gate is shut again, and the calf lays down to whimper in its sleep. The people trickle away. One boy remains, a dark-eyed child, and he wonders what its dreams are like...





# LONGING

What's in the animal's dream? Longing for the pasture, for the herd. Longing for the plains, for the sweeping, running winds. Longing for security in numbers, for others of the breed, for instinct and migration.

The morning-frost expanse and the rising sun, rays refracted and dispersed by plenty diamond dewdrops congealed beneath a mother moon. The sweltering afternoons, where the landscape weeps beneath the weight of heat. The relief of evening, the passage of night. The change of season, the impulse to survive. The brisk rejoicing, as the newly risen shake off sleep, prancing free-trot legs, and the early flies begin to land and start the tail ends flicking, while the younger of the band prance and leap and roughhouse, basking in a moment.

Further in, a sense of self-sufficiency: searching for the grass, the cud, the dandelions, and finding it; finding it and calling victoriously to one's brethren with a prideful bleat, for feeding time is now. Then grazing and nourishing together. Together in pride, in safety, in cohesive comprehension. Surviving, reproducing, and prospering together. Gaining in strength together. Oh yes, and even starving together.

But then, awakened by the spectator's curiosity, arisen on the shorn and slept-in hay, the chemical taste of formula milk, lodged as yet within its gums or scattered on its tongue, the calf slinks over to the water bin and slakes its thirst in standing pools. Bits of hay and fur detach and float; saliva gobs outspread and drift, frothy bubbles idly wallowing.





## Gum

Chew your gum at the petting zoo. Smack it mouth wide, glob pink. Exhale-inflate, a bubble broadening, until it ruptures and weakly slacks, like a wilted, latex drag. Now retract it with gusto and set to work, as a hog to slop.

You could also quietly chew, wearing eyes of empty, the lower half of your face in repetitive motion. A small and circular rotation, hypnotically meditative, which reveal the dimples in your cheeks. It is calm, of course, but calmness born of blankness. Like the cow to its cud, slowly surveying the box's walls.

Or perhaps you are the type who tucks it under, suckles it for hours at a time. Maybe you give it a chew to set the flavor loose, then back it goes into the gums, the pouch you have evolved. You store it like a rodent.





# I Love the Petting Zoo

I love the petting zoo, the petting camp,  
the animal internment. Zebras are my  
favorite. Chinchillas I like least. I will not  
state my reasons.

I love the petting zoo, the petting prance,  
the feeling farm. My fingers twitch upon  
caress. My smile hits upon connect.  
Bloodlessly reptilian.

I love the petting zoo, the kennel tents, the  
stable farm. Dress the animals in clothes.  
Home-stitched sweaters, dirty breeches; hats and  
beads become them. They will not overheat.

I love the petting zoo, the scratching stalls, the  
child's fair. Encounter rare and never-before-  
seen creatures—not only encounter them, but  
you may touch and rake their living flesh.  
They know where they get their bread.





# Roger Roger

The little girl with the painted face holds the rabbit in her arms—horizontally, like a log. Belly upward, paws lax, he meekly submits as mommy’s camera flashes.

The perfect photo-op, for the child’s grinning, cherubic face is painted to resemble that of the rabbit’s: a pink, button nose with charcoal whiskers, dots of white upon her cheeks. Truly the stuff of holiday cards. Five dollars, cash. Exact change only, please.

In her milky arms, Roger has grown lax with fear. His glossy, chestnut eyes are black with terror. He submits to her love as he submits to his death: with quiet resignation. The girl could kill with the squeeze of her hand. Sporadically, he swipes his broad, right foot, meeting only air. It whips in a circle, as if pedaling, because it is the only free appendage.

Squished in her arms, Roger holds his breath. Then, as the camera flashes, he starts and twists, writhes and squirms, until the shocked child loses her grip. Then he plummets down to her feet and lays there in a state of shock, while she giggles in effusive joy—and picks him up again and lays her lips upon his soft and fleshy neck, purring at her plaything.





# Animals Are Silly

The girl with the painted face says animals are silly. She exclaims it, an immediate realization. An *ah ha!* moment. And she discovered it alone, on her own, at the petting zoo. Animals are silly at the petting zoo.

“Animals are silly!” says the girl with the painted face. “Look at the goofy llama. Like the puppets on TV. He is even smiling! I like to watch him eat, flapping his ugly face. Can we call him Flappy?”

“Animals are silly!” says the girl with the painted face. The way they shake and bound about. The way they drool and lap the water up. “Look at that one pee-pee, and he doesn’t even care. Do camels go to heaven?”

“Animals are silly!” says the girl with the painted face. “What funny sounds they make! Honk! Blub! Honk, Mr. Camel!”





## Blossom

The little red bow upon her head wavers in the wind, an affectionate ruffle which causes it to shift and flutter and undulate like a rare rose in full bloom. Really it crowns her, and the animals are drawn to it. In fact I think they want to bite it off, an enticing bit of blossom for consumption. And if the cherubic bud detaches with the petals, they only have to spit it out their mouths.





## **Born They Live**

Dreams are born at the petting zoo. Avenues unlocked. Alleyways discovered. Entire blocks are opened. Imagination enriches the child's budding vistas.

Really it's a bargain price. Think of the sensations! Think of the fun-filled education! What could be better than direct interaction? It sure beats text and television. Direct, tangible interaction, which captivates all five senses.

Dreams are born at the petting zoo. Dreams are born, and born they live. Who would deprive their child of the opportunity? Who would so dare? Really, it is necessary. I have never seen more joy, more interest, more curiosity, more fascination in a child than at the petting zoo. What a memory to have, to reminisce about, to smile over!





## Home-Grown

In the saddle at the petting zoo. Her preteen legs nearly touch the ground. For the steed is but a miniature, whose calves are of such short proportions that its shaggy tail scratches at the sod. In short, the child's legs are longer than the pony's height. Such a sweetened smile smacks her berry lips, the parasite in joy, while the tiny animal droops its crestfallen head. Another picture for the taking. She bounces up and down.

The keeper firmly grips the reins, for surely some thought of rebellion creeps into the animal's stubborn brain. The keeper is garbed in a lacy, white and yellow shirt littered with hundreds of pink hearts, which look like pockmarks from a distance. The sleeves pooch out and terminate just above the elbows. On her head rests a glossy ten gallon hat, pushed and angled upward so that blood red bill smushes her hair and ears, exposing a slab of beef jerky, which passes for a forehead. A home-grown look, indeed.





# The Keeper

I am the keeper. Pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. I own this ranch, the petting zoo. Our animals are happy. They know no other life. They're better off than in the wild. They have a better diet. Their lives are more fulfilling.

Take Sancho, our miniature pony, as a case in point. Now how do you think he'd be out there in nature, a tiny thing like him? Why he'd starve to death alone; he's got no kin out there. Point is, our animals are *oneofakind*, *oneofakind*, each with its own unique individuality. And the kids, they can see that. They can sense it.

So I can't hardly understand your aversion. You see, these animals bring such joy to the world. And they can sense a child's innocence—they work with him, tolerate him. And I don't mind telling you, something which brings such happiness to a child can't be bad. It just can't.





## Outhouse This Way

Outhouse This Way. Or you could just hop into the pen and do your business in the corner; squat alongside the wallaby. Won't he be curious?

Outhouse This Way. Output here. Down the chute and ousted. An out-and-out procedure.

Outhouse This Way. Occupied. Potty-training day. My little one is learning. Endeavor to be patient. Watch the camel piss.

Outhouse This Way. Outrush clear. Outward thrust and push. An ousting flush of current. My little one is done. She done it all alone.





# EAT A DOG; PET A HOG

Eat a Dog; Pet a Hog.

A sign on a stand a dozen feet away. Hot dogs on rotisserie. Humans cannot live on hay. Sink your teeth into an all-beef frank. Give the hog a thankful slap.

Eat a Dog; Pet a Hog.

A very clean hog, so as not to mar the smell of roasted swine, the most effective advertisement. And you can bet the meat is fresh. And the hog, it juts its snout between the horizontal bars and tongues the ravenizing scent.

Eat a Dog; Pet a Hog.

Step right up, my boy. Now what sort of dog you like? We've got chilidogs, corndogs, saltydogs, butterdogs, and my personal favorite, lavadogs. You just leave the hog for now and tell me what I can getcha? You know you gotta eat a dog to pet the hog.

Eat a Dog; Pet a Hog.

Load up on the relish. Get yourself a fountain drink. Toss a morsel at the hog. Watch him lap it up without a thought. Hear him brusquely grunt and sniff for more. Maybe he will train his beady eyes on you.





# I Love the Petting Zoo

I love the petting zoo, the feeding ranch,  
the husbandry. Christmas comes but once a  
year. The petting zoo is life. And oh the sto-  
ries we can tell!

I love the petting zoo, the breeding farm,  
the ranch collective. Like a close-knit family:  
some will misbehave, while others get along;  
some will turn defiant, while others will con-  
form. But we tolerate them all, out of our  
inherent goodness. We reprimand the wild  
ones, we curb their nasty tempers.

I love the petting zoo, the family ranch, the  
podunk den. Stop outside and twirl around.  
Twirl around and sally in. Sally in and stay a  
spell. Stay a spell and spread your crumbs.  
Spread your crumbs and pet the zoo. Pet the  
zoo and tell your friends.

I love the petting zoo, the pissing pens, the  
sprawl of domesticity. A peaceful interaction,  
tolerant and mutual, happy and harmonious.  
Relish their attention. They are healthy and  
robust. Better than the city zoo.





# ALEXANDER

## Alexander

The little goat kicks the fence. Maybe just to make a noise, just to capture our attention with the novelty. On the other hand, it could be in defiance. But we don't read it that way. At least not during business hours.

A chiming, chainlink rattle which may, on the child's level, be indicative of Santa's sleighbells, but is, in reality, the fence merely. The encroaching fence. Merely. A positive annoyance for the hands around the ranch. "Alexander's at it again," they sagely remark from behind their brooms.

The little goat kicks the fence. Front hoof forward, driver's side. Three successive kicks, like a chinkling S.O.S. I wonder how the little goat developed that little talent. Natural selection at work for you there because, you see, the goat which knows the most about human tendencies, human nature, is going to be fed the most. He will be the healthiest, and hence most likely to breed.

Alexander has adapted to his surroundings. His offspring will survive, and will, like the father, develop skills which please the humans, which bring more food to their plates. Maybe soon, a family of Alexanders, engulfed beneath an honorary red and white striped canopy, stretched like the skin of some highly venomous reptile between the supports. From there they'll gaze out at the passerby, like impoverished denizens of a less fortunate country, watching fat and privileged tourists on a double-helping of vacation.





## Trapped

He pokes his head through the brick-red bars, unaware, it seems, of his newly formed horns, approximately three inches in length, and curving. From behind the horizontal gate, his neck appears elongated, causing his head to appear larger than it truly is, and he thrusts his teeth out hungrily.

He rests his throat upon the bottom rung and nips the sandy potato chips from the hands proffered, forelegs pressed against the steel. His shins rub horizontally along the bars as he attempts to push out further.

And freshly lapping at his jowls, he pulls himself back in: only to find his head is trapped, caught by the newly formed, the arching horns, whose length he has been unable to account, and so finds himself in this predicament.

Panicking, he reels his head back in, causing a mighty, forceful rattle. He is met by a series of whooping hoots, which only stokes his panic. His body struggles, quivers, kicks and lunges with all its might, until, fatigued, he resigns himself completely. And those hands, those same entrapping hands, they lay themselves across his head and gently free his horns. Smells of oil, salt, and sugar.





## Birds

Watching the birds in flight, while the people roam the stalls, as if mesmerized by a trick of illusion. Freedom of the skies does not exist.

Watching the birds in flight. Bridled to the post or sitting on a bench, the birds are viewed without a conscious effort. The animals are hypnotized. Their hearts envy, disbelieve, and then renew their envy.

Watching the birds in flight. A body, a skeleton so light it rides the countless airwaves. So motionless, they might even be asleep. Sleep, of course, being the purest sort of freedom, how would it be to sleep in the skies? To doze away in motion, reawaken in a new terrain.

Watching the birds in flight. Maneuvering in place and shifting wind-to-wind by the feel of the feathers alone, completely unleashed. And through simple movements, they may soar indefinitely.

So the little goat kicks the fence because he lacks the power of flight.





## Rebel

The turkey saunters down the length of the fence, glaring evilly. My eyes remark the sharpness of his beak. I wonder what he'd do if the fence was not in place. His smoldering anger seems, somehow, justified. Like a righteous judge of man, eyes vindictively impartial, which weigh the severity of a crime.

He paces, squawking, and the herd of people gaze with caution on their faces, with corn nuts in their fists, the will to feed the turkey written plainly. But Asmerond will not be fed. He kicks away the offerings with an amply clawed foot. He raises himself up and boldly shrieks at the girl with the painted face. He pecks at the hands proffered. He rushes at his captors. Asmerond will not be tamed.





## Smile

“Fine. I will try to smile more,” I resignedly told my doctor. My head was trapped between the bars. First comes one and then the other. Smile first, then freedom follows. Smile now, no matter how hypocritical it may seem.

Such an excellent case of mimicry. Like that lemur at the petting zoo. Developed the ability to roll its lips into its cheeks and imitate a human smile, ghastly though it was. Like curtains opening symmetrically to reveal rows of mismatched teeth at rest upon an undergrowth of blackened gums.

This trick brought it all the treats—the finest that the feeding farm provides. Rewards, because of imitation. Smiled just like every toothy human in the place—except my troubled self, of course. All because it had adapted, became meek, meek, meek. And it’s treats today, but whips tomorrow. Small wonder that my eyes are dark.

But I told my doctor I would smile more. She says the very act of smiling is therapeutic. So I will try to smile, to smile like a lemur. I told my doctor that I love the petting zoo.



